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Amazing Technicolor Dream Road

Tune in to autumn reds and golds along Utah's Highway 12.



The glow of leaves lining Utah's Highway 12 begins in September.

By Peter Jaret

You can drive from one end of Utah's highway 12 to the other in just over three hours. But I dare you to try.

MORE FALL FAVORITES

While autumnal colors may put you more in mind of New Hampshire than Nevada, the West does stage captivating displays of fall foliage in places you might not expect—for example, these six. For more autumn drives, visit viamagazine.com. For directions and navigation tools, go to AAA.com/roadtrip.

AUFDERHEIDE NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY Oregon

Connecting both the Willamette and McKenzie rivers, this 64-mile run through the west side of the Cascade Range showcases maples and oaks as well as old-growth Douglas fir. Mountain bikers take note: The town of Oakridge, near the southern end of the drive, lies within reach of nearly 500 miles of riding trails. **When to go:** Late September to early October. **Getting there:** Head west from Oakridge on SR 68 for five miles. Turn right on Forest Road 19 and travel north to SR 126.

This curvy two-lane road in the middle of southern Utah's high desert is one of the most spectacular drives in the West. Squeezing through narrow rock canyons, soaring to razor-edge ridgelines with jaw-dropping views, and passing beneath airy groves of aspens, the 125-mile route takes in four state parks, two national parks, a national forest, and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Dubbed the Journey Through Time Scenic Byway, Highway 12 offers plenty to see throughout the year. But during the fall, when the maples, oaks, and especially aspens are ablaze in vibrant reds and golds, even the locals get out of their cars to ooh and aah. "One of the things I love is the incredible variety of landscapes: pasturelands, narrow canyons, and then, suddenly, those vast distances," says Valerie Orlemann, a plein air painter who resides in the area. "Add the incredible fall colors, and it's really a painter's dream."

Head southeast on Highway 12 from just outside Panguitch, about 250 miles south of Salt Lake City,

COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE

Oregon and Washington. A 170-mile trek out and back along the river takes in forests of oaks, maples, and alder in the west and dry grasslands dominated by cottonwoods in the east. **Detour:** The 35-mile Fruit Loop (Highways 35 and 281) out of Hood River features apple and pear orchards, alpaca ranches, and a lavender farm. **When to go:** Late September to mid-October.

Getting there: Take I-84 east out of Portland to The Dalles. Cross The Dalles Bridge, then go west on SR 14 to Vancouver, Wash.

FEATHER RIVER SCENIC

BYWAY California. This 130-mile route passes Lake Oroville on its way to the edge of the Great Basin, then plunges into the Feather River Canyon. Here, oak trees sporting red and orange leaves share the hillsides with ponderosa pines. Stop by the Plumas County Museum in Quincy, which chronicles the area's history as a hub of mining and logging activity in the 19th century. **When to go:** Late September to early November. **Getting there:** Pick up SR 70 off SR 99, six miles north of Oroville, then head east to the junction with U.S. 395.

and you won't wait long to be dazzled. A few miles in, the route enters Red Canyon, a compact stretch of desert with some of the richest crimson-colored rocks found anywhere. It's well worth stopping (I warned you) to walk the one-mile Birdseye trail, which affords close-up views of the totemlike spires of rock called hoodoos that preside over much of this terrain.

Even this preview won't quite prepare you for the majesty of Bryce Canyon National Park. The park occupies the long, narrow Paunsaugunt Plateau, overlooking a sweeping countryside carved with thousands of hoodoos, standing at attention like ranks of ghostly soldiers. Bryce deserves a leisurely visit, but if you don't have time to explore it, drive four miles to Fairyland Point, just outside the gate, to view the park's otherworldly beauty.

"This area was once part of one of the largest sand dune deposits on the face of the earth, stretching from Wyoming to the southern tip of Nevada," explains Southern Utah University geologist Mark Colberg. The ancient sand was compacted into stone and then worn away to form the etched rock faces and teetering spires. Beyond the small towns of Tropic and Cannonville, a

JUNE LAKE LOOP California. In addition to winding through groves of aspens in various shades of yellow, orange, and red, this 16-mile jaunt in the eastern Sierra meanders near four mountain lakes—Grant, Silver, Gull, and June, each a popular spot for trout fishing, boating, and bird-watching. Don't forget your camera. There's ample opportunity to capture some foliage, particularly as it's reflected in the water. **When to go:** Late September to mid-October. **Getting there:** Head south from Lee Vining on U.S. 395 for five miles. Turn right on SR 158.

LAMOILLE CANYON SCENIC BYWAY Nevada. The lush, lake-filled Ruby Mountains sit in stark contrast to the parched environs that make up much of the Great Basin. Aspens and cottonwoods add yellow and orange hues to the hillsides in fall. A small parking area (elevation 8,800 feet) sits at the end of the 13-mile road and offers trail access for hearty hikers. **When to go:** Mid-September to mid-October. **Getting there:** From Elko, follow SR 227 19 miles southeast to Lamoille Canyon Road, then turn right.

seven-mile road off Highway 12 leads to Kodachrome Basin State Park, where eons of erosion have left behind sandstone chimneys, some 170 feet tall, that seem to defy gravity. Erosion also formed cathedral-like arched recesses in the rock faces. Pull out at milepost 51 to see one of the most impressive examples, which features two stone granaries built into the arch by the Fremont Indians 1,000 years ago.

It's hard to imagine now, but in the prehistoric past sections of this arid land were underwater. At Escalante Petrified Forest State Park, a short loop trail winds among the remains of ancient trees toppled by floodwaters and buried in silt, the wood gradually replaced by silica in a surprisingly wide variety of colors, from sunny yellows to deep purples. A few stumps are so well preserved you can see the bark and even count the rings.

Nowhere are the views more dramatic than on the stretch of road after milepost 75, where Highway 12 climbs the knifeedge ridge known as the Hogsback, with occasional 1,000-foot drops just beyond the shoulder. From many pull-offs you can see the rounded dome of Navajo Mountain in the distance and, beyond, Waterpocket

PEND OREILLE SCENIC BYWAY

Idaho. Birch, tamarack larch, and poplar help create a green-red-gold tapestry in Idaho's Panhandle. The 33-mile drive to the Montana state line hugs the east side of 65-mile-long Lake Pend Oreille and the Clark Fork River, both of which draw anglers casting for perch and rainbow trout. Keep an eye open for ospreys, which fish the lake waters as well. **When to go:** Mid-September to late October.

Getting there: From Sandpoint, follow U.S. 95 10 miles north to State Highway 200. Turn right and continue east.

Waterpocket Fold, a nearly 100-mile-long bend in the earth's crust that stretches like a curtain across the surroundings. On the clearest days, only the curvature of the earth interrupts your view.

Though there are places to eat along Highway 12, Hell's Backbone Grill is a destination for devoted gourmets thanks to its inventive use of traditional Southwestern ingredients such as pine nuts and posole corn—foods harvested by some of the earliest inhabitants of the area. You'll see remains of the fire pits they used at Anasazi State Park, where a village dating

between a.d. 1050 and 1250 has been partially excavated. The park's small but well-designed museum displays a spear point from the Ice Age (the oldest artifact ever found in the area), along with exquisite examples of Anasazi pottery.

Although you'll see splashes of fall brilliance set against the more muted desert colors all along the route, the real show begins when Highway 12 climbs the heavily forested shoulder of Boulder Mountain, passing under groves of aspens transformed into a canopy of shimmering gold. The route winds through so many changes in elevation that you're almost certain to find areas of peak color from late September through late October. On these gentle hills, bent trunks show where the ground shifted and young trees had to right themselves. Pronghorn antelope roam the slopes, as do cowboys herding cattle from nearby ranches.

Highway 12 ends—or begins, depending on your starting point—near the town of Torrey, not far from the entrance to Capitol Reef National Park. The park is named for the rounded white Navajo sandstone formation that resembles the dome of the U.S. Capitol and for Waterpocket Fold, which early pioneers, many of them former seamen, dubbed a reef because of its impassably steep cliff walls. There's a world of difference between this undulating environment and the ghostly hoodoos of Bryce, and a world of sights on the extraordinary byway that links them. Take a camera, binoculars, a water bottle, a pair of sturdy walking shoes—and your time.

If you're going . . .

Request the *Colorado & Utah TourBook* and Nevada & Utah map at AAA.com or at any AAA branch office. For more on Highway 12, visit utah.com/byways/highway_12.htm. Area code is 435 except as noted.

TO SEE AND DO

Anasazi State Park Highway 12, Boulder, 335-7308, utah.com/stateparks/anasazi.htm. **Calf Creek Recreation Area** 15 miles east of Escalante, 826-5499, utah.com/hike/calf_creek.htm. **Paunsaugunt Wildlife Museum** Exhibits on area fauna. 1945 W. Hwy. 12, Bryce, 834-5555, brycecanyonmuseum.com.

EATS

Boulder Mesa Restaurant 155 E. Burr Trail Rd., Boulder, 335-7447, bouldermesa.com. **Cafe Diablo** Fare includes desert rattlesnake patties. 599 W. Main St., Torrey, 425-3070, cafediabolo.net. **Clarke's** Comfort food at a local favorite. 141 N. Main St., Tropic, 679-8383. **Cowboy Blues** Salads, chicken, and steak. 30 Main St., Escalante, 826-4577. **Cowboy Smokehouse** Mesquite-smoked ribs. 95 N. Main St., Panguitch, 676-8030. **Hell's Backbone Grill** 20 N. Hwy. 12, Boulder, 335-7464, hellsbackbonegrill.com. **Kiva Koffeehouse** Highway 12, between Escalante and Boulder, 826-4550, kivakoffeehouse.com.

SLEEPS

Austin's Chuckwagon Motel From \$64 for AAA members. 12 W. Main, Torrey, (800) 863-3288. **Best Western Capitol Reef** From \$72 for AAA members. 2600 E. Hwy. 24, Torrey, (888) 610-9600. **Boulder Mountain Lodge** From \$99. 20 N. Hwy. 12, Boulder, (800) 556-3446. **Bryce Canyon Inn** From \$70. Highway 12, Tropic, 679-8502. **Circle D Motel** From \$55. 475 W. Main St., Escalante, 826-4297. **Purple Sage Motel** From \$60. 132 E. Center St., Panguitch, 676-2659.